

# Symbols and Symbolism: The Representamen of Infelicities in Chigozie Obioma's *The Fishermen* (2015)

Abib Sene

Department of Anglophone Studies, Laboratory of African and Postcolonial Studies, Cheikh Anta Diop University, Senegal

Received: 06 Jul 2021; Received in revised form: 07 Aug 2021; Accepted: 12 Aug 2021; Available online: 17 Aug 2021

©2021 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open access article under the CC BY license

(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

**Abstract**— Symbolism and literary imagery have always been means of transmitting socio-political messages through engaged literature. In a logic of casting a critical look at his society, the Nigerian writer, Chigozie Obioma, resorts to a literary text dotted with images and symbols to underline the ills of a society whose family unit disassembles to sink into a tragic chaos. With a style endowed with features of allegory, Obioma, in *The Fishermen*, shapes out a narrative discourse through which he iconizes the socio-political issues that submerged Nigeria in the recent past and continues to swamp on its people. In this paper, we manage to de-fictionalize the author's message to lay bare the crude meaning of his hinting about river space and foolishness. Our analytical approach is based on the theory of symbolism to better connect social and physical representamen to their connotations and denotations. A focus is then put on the reading of the physical and psychological ensigns that centralize the big pictures which condensate the different predicaments that, indeed, gangrene the daily life in Nigeria.

**Keywords**— river, madness, corruption, evil, gunk, misery, death.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The symbol of water goes hand in glove with the history of mankind. It is lodged from the Alpha and the Omega of human existence and appears to be a pulling and pushing actant of life in all its aspects and processes. In *The Fishermen*, the river Omi-Ala spreads through Akure to wet the issues of myth, religion and destiny. Chigozie Obioma, in his first novel, exposes the river to fish out the problematic of socio-political troubles that thwart at large the Nigerians' way to peace, stability and social progress. Besides, the aquatic space is portrayed as a crossroads of ins and outs of a people's traditions and cosmogony. Thus being, it becomes necessary to fold out the theory of symbolism to build up a highlighting argument that wraps up the points related to space and mental break down. According to Gabriela Duda, the symbol is "the analogous relation between an aspect of the ideal world and an element of the visual material world" (Duda, 2000: 72). Actually, the symbol is understood, in this work, as the signified pall on which is reflected the true nature of the symbolizing item.

In addition, in his study on his society, the Nigerian writer makes an archaeological decoding of the social phenomenon of madness to dabble the wrong side of his people. What does the iconic reference of the river stand for? What are the political and social explanations of madness in *The Fishermen*? This bunch of questions will guide our analysis on

fluvial and psychological spaces that call the attention of many African thinkers among whom Obioma, who sinuously affects denotative and connotative meanings to his fictional symbols in his novel, *The Fishermen*.

## II. A SPACE OF DEATH: A CONTINUUM OF EVILNESS

The river, in *The Fishermen*, is a maritime space that stands as a metaphorical icon of evilness through which Akure is shaken down from its roots of social stability. Its waters move and make move a spirit whose death-giving force irradiates the surroundings to arouse strong feelings of fear and fright. The demonized river unwraps its bed to give space to its capacity of destruction and dimness towards the people of Akure, "Omi-Ala was a dreadful river" (Obioma 2015: 15) that mouths out jugs of warm water from which the spirit brings forth a negative energy that befalls on those who dare get contact with it. Thus being, Omi concatenates an unfoldable hook-up that spouses a syntagmatic nature between its unspeakable forces and its visitors who are baptized in the name of an indefectible and horrifying destiny. Death and malediction become the *mediat* references of Omi-Ala and misfortune is raised as an umbrella identity through which the river itself is clogged out of easy reach. Like an epiphany that iconizes a haunted place, the river reveals to be a source of existential grief and sorrow. The narrator introduces it

as a symbol of evilness which has deeply dismantled the social organization in Akure where its streams flounder and turn into an aquatic painting of which umbilical reference links the Agwu family with misfortune. Fluvial water is then dabbed and dim-eyed as an allusion to painful convulsions of a society deprived of their identity and well-being by a political system, which desacralizes local customs and religions to implement and impose another perspective of cosmogony in Africa in general and Nigeria in particular. In addition, Obioma, in *The Fishermen*, affects a semiotic meaning to the aquatic space to echo the lethargy and extreme ailment of the Nigerian populations. If “elites are expected to be the spokesmen of their people, defending their interests in national institutions and getting for them their share of ‘the national cake’ (Berman 2003, 14), the upper social class in Nigeria are strongly concerned with their political power. “They are generally known to have created intractable conflicts, misused of power, violated human rights, abused and driven their people further into the bowels of poverty” (Okumu, 2002, 22). The élite is then described as a handful minority that take advantage of the premium privileges to the detriment of the poor masses, who, indeed, with an open-mouthed fascination, observed, from afar, a humdrum spectacle of grab and take.

Omi-Ala is a concentrated of flaws that, in a way, mirrors glitches in the post-independent Nigeria which, because of corruption, misgovernance and political conflicts, releases the smell of disgust and disintegration. Its noun: Omi (a noun) and Ala (a verb) rings like a composed noun which contracts two oxymorons in Yoruba language: [Omi] means[water]; and [Ala] refers to the action of[dreaming]. As such, a bucolic atmosphere sparkles through its vagaries. Omi-Ala is not any longer, indeed, the water of dreams, but a river surface with its upshots of death and misgauges.

The rivalry between political leaders at a national level, bring decision-makers to leave Nigeria to its own to make do with its resources. The populations' dreams are then drown into swampy waters of disillusionment and hopelessness. Omi-Ala is then an open coffin that alerts on the lurking dangers that can derive from any form of anti-patriotism. From the sacredness of religious reference, the river moves into an impurity of its components. Detritus, bins, bad grasses, oil, putrefaction, bear the identity of a median reference that spotlights the policy of sinecure strongly systematized in Nigeria. In fact, because of vicissitudes of all kinds, Nigeria loses its social and economic decorations and adornments to spouse a pictorial model thank to which criminal happenings and moral impurities remain the symbolical décor of an ambulatory shadow that replaces the living image of a clean running river:

Omi-Ala was once believed to be a god; people worshipped it. They erected shrines in its name, and courted the intercession and guidance of Iyemoja, Osha, mermaids, and other spirits and gods that dwelt in water bodies. This changed when the colonialists

came from Europe, and introduced the Bible, which then prized Omi-Ala's adherents from it, and the people, now largely Christians, began to see it as an evil place. A cradle of besmeared (Obioma, 2015: 15).

Omi-Ala and the populations of Nigeria are sacrificed in the name of a political system that drives at uprooting local people to better confine them into impecunious mentalities. Such a system is perpetrated by the post-independent leaders who, through their self-mind orientation, abandon their fellows in delirious states of anxiety. Ebegbulem highlights:

Corruption has adversely affected Nigeria's economy. Financial resources which would have been used to facilitate the country's economic development have been diverted into private banks account abroad. [...] this is indeed the reason for high level of poverty, insecurity and widespread diseases (Ebegbulem, 2013: 8).

The River then sparkingly mirrors a political force that equals an aquatic monster which reinforces a mortiferous presence festered by a dreamless and joyless aquatic space. Its drawing in *The Fishermen* is a depiction in which *actants* are fixed to bear and vehicle several meanings. In fact, Omi-Ala is a stream that traces its roots in the sources of Akure populations' daily existences. Its waters full of memories and societal symbols let flow the figurative implications that sun up Akure and therefore Nigeria in its chain of events. Like the Styx River in the Greco-Roman mythology, Omi-Ala is a looking glass of both life and death. Actually, Obioma, in his perspective to cast a critical look at his own nation in times of political troubles, puts forward the symbolic of a river which rises from a being to a none being presence; a process through which it bogs down life to sow the germs of nothingness. Omi unleashes its evil forces on Akure and grants itself a right and power to distil fear and favours tragedies that find ground on trashes of despotic regimes. Political leadership is then questioned and the social malaise that derives from it is pointed as a vector that condemns decision-makers in Nigeria:

The trouble with Nigeria [...] is simply and squarely a failure of leadership. There is nothing basically wrong with the Nigerian character. There is nothing wrong with the Nigerian land or climate or water or air or anything else. The Nigerian problem is the unwillingness or inability of its leaders to rise to the

responsibility, to the challenge of personal examples which are the hallmarks of leadership (Meredith, 2006: 221).

Omi-Ala is a narrative space which is in-between and end-all of the **R narration**. It focalizes the main characters and controls the time, the speed and the duration of the narrative process. Described as a sociological symbol, the river waters mythanalysis-and- psychoanalysis-based meanings of the Akure community and consequently of Nigerian people as a whole. The savage and mysterious portrayals of the aforementioned place bear the hallmarks of 'the forbidden'. And what is in its innermost nature as a source of life and regeneration is turned into a milieu of evil spirit, a space of death and damnation. At the image of Nigeria which is termed as a corrupted and spoilt country, Omi-Ala is dirtied and allied beyond recognition. A parallel is drawn and similarities become stark and symbolic. In point of fact, what was to be a heavenly space and regarded as such, has become an inferno milieu just good to water and irrigate fear, malediction and death. The river then turns out to be a place of agglutination of ill-forces. All adventurers in its waters or surroundings are doomed to abide by its spiritual laws, which rise much more sensitiveness than rationality. Its presence recalls and stands as a total sum of mistakes of all kinds that beset life in Akure.

The aquatic surface is, indeed, filled with political, economic and social data that tell much about the mode of governance in Akure, a country abused at a point that human *actants* are taken out of their reflexivity and lucidity: "the river was abandoned. Incident after incident accumulated over many years, tainting the history of the river and corrupting its name so much so that – in time – the mere mention of it triggered disdain. (pp. 15-16). With its corteges of evil forces, Omi-Ala obeys a dynamic of impulses of death. The spasmodic blissfulness of fatality is connected to the abyssal doubt and gnawing incertitude that fuel a whirlwind of irrationality and *summa sceptica*. The propagation of distress in Akure can be measured by the sterility of its river which, in fact, disqualifies hope and goodness to promote and drizzle insanity and catastrophism.

The space is a common denominator through which the combustible forces are burnt up to demean the people in Akure. The numinous milieu becomes a mark of powerlessness, a vector of motionless, a location swamped by negative paranormal activities. Its existence transcends the social time in Akure to lodge its presence in the collective consciousness of those who are opposed to its timeless exigencies. Being *suis generis* by essence, the river rhythms life with a logic of before-an-after, a following of inchoative and durative happenings. The past, the present and the future are then condensed into a temporality that fixes laws and rules which define life in Omi-Ala surroundings. Time and space merge to shape out a belief, a behaviour, and a way of life in which the river is considered to be a place of misfortune, disease and death.

Death is the other slope of life. Its conception in the Igbo cosmogony is based on the notion and belief of a departure, a journey toward the world of the dead and that of the spirits: "in the Igbo ontology, death is necessarily a continuum" (Ebo, 2019:

23). In *The Fishermen*, the narrator follows Abulu's destiny up to its ending point: Omi-Alariver. Hatred by Ikena's brothers, Obeme, Boja, and Benjamin, Abulu is daily hunted by Obeme and Benjamin who look forward avenging Ike's and Boja's tragic ends. In a head-to-head match, the protagonists engage a death or life race that leads the mad man to Omi-Ala. Abulu, the *prophet* of Akure, under the two brothers' cruel grips, chooses the hunted river to draw his last breath:

The madman was frantic, mad, dazed. He flung his arms aloft to shield himself, running backward, shouting and screaming. The blows perforated his flesh, boring bleeding holes and ripping out chunks of his flesh every time we pulled out the hooks. [...] we kept hitting, pulling, striking, screaming, crying and sobbing until weakened, covered in blood, and wailing like a child, Abulu fell backward into the water in a wild splash. (p. 249).

Abulu hoses the river with blood before getting his body float on surface. The madman is dead! A voice of no less a mythic figure as the *prophet* of Akure is silenced in the corrupted waters of a cursed river. The plot takes an *elegiac* tone and a connectedness is put between space and time. Omi-Ala is transformed into a hospice, an asylum of lost and sensitive souls, a God's acre of the weak that pictures an image of *tabula rasa*. In parallel to Nigeria, the river is in troubles. Both spaces are filled with shadows of brutalities, sufferings and bear the expressions and achievements of political leaders who fail to switch on the light of hope and prosperity for all.

Omi-Ala mirrors Nigeria and Nigerians' shadows of (hi)story written with the innocents' and victims' blood. The river cannot any longer wet life in Nigeria. Its waters are fixed on a time of which duration is clocked in length, width and depth by the last page that bears the writings of the rule of the strongest. Misfortune is *diachronized* and synchronized to find the intensity of hopelessness. The physical and fluvial spaces are now identified as easy preys of fatal predicaments. The daily life is therefore defined under the cloak of exclusion and is condemned into perpetuity of a non-being state. In Akure, life is a matter of perpetual suffering and death, a punctual *actant* that witnesses the body failure which is a condensed of struggles and privatisations. From its attributes of a space of dreams, Omi turns into a river of nightmares and stop definitely being a 'heaven of delight' (Coomaraswamy, 1974: 6).

### III. MADNESS OF PROFICIENCY: THE SCRAP'S VOICE

Regarded as being "a big lock-in" (Foucault, 1972: 56), madness sometimes, in an African perception, can be considered to be a state of mind that connects the individual to the unseen

and non-physical world. The 'dis-socialized' man is then bestowed with a skywarded spirit that turns him into a vision-seeing person. The social distance the madman operates is just a disconnection from the world of the living that opens the doors of metal lidded secrets and powers in which abuzz and voices that come on line to empower some few-selected. Madness then, in an *africanized* conception, appears as an initiatory 'illness', an acquisition of power, a pointer to singular capacities that give a right to play god. Hence, its temporality aspect that switches off the spear of time to separate the bodily and physical space from the spiritual material. The individual then rises to the sheer ranks of the chosen ones to spend one on one time with the spirited energy to learn the deepest lessons of the know-how. A barrier is therefore raised and the enlightened becomes a 'deviant' behaviour. His world turns into a vision that sounds awkward and up-side down for the lambda fellow.

The mad person is the one who jumps ahead in the community in which he is, but does not any longer belong to. He is labelled mad and is daily ignored and excluded by those who think that he regular grinds his way through nonentities and nonsenses.

In *The Fishermen*, Abulu is a giant soul carrying a vision of the future. He lives under the foot of a tree alone and by his own. Far from the ordinary community, he is in communion with the spirits of the invisible world where he gets entangled in a net of weird voices that dish him out of power to bring first-hand news to the ordinary citizens. Dirty, dusty, and bad smelly, Abulu is the shadow of humanity whose words ring and sound poppycock for the lesser beings, who, indeed, are expostulated and put off for life with the mad man's heluva lot of idiosyncratic discourses. And that is all the more true as he becomes a game object in the hands of children who regard him as a threadbare existence, so horrible and bleak that they call him names.

Abulu's presence in Akure sounds as necessary as security is in the forefront of the inhabitants. His capacity to second-guess people's destinies compels his community to give a hearing and adopt a faithful admiration and endearment even if, paradoxically, they keep him at bay, treating him, here and there, as a dross to put on the receiving side of brutality. The narrator illustrates: "people sometimes turned violent when he tried to make them hear a vision. They sometimes harmed him, piling curses, tears and jeremiahs like a heap of soiled clothes on his head" (p.94). In spite of that awful attitude toward the madman, Abulu keeps on prophesizing "accidents", and "death" (p.95). He looks at the rear of some couples and denounces infidelity: "you keep sleeping with Matthew, your husband's friend even if in your matrimonial bed" (p.96). Through his words, friendships are strengthened, love magnified and waned down, illnesses are cured, and terrorist acts concealed. Lives are spared and saved. His prophesies reveal to be "catalogues of catastrophes" (p.95), and telegraphs of good and bad fates. In so being, his madness appears to be an oracle shrine where his spirit finds refuge to talk to "the kingdom of people" (p.95). Abulu is then back from the brink and put his mental break down as an interface between his realm and that of his community of origin. The two worlds are poles apart and the foul is the one who dictates his will to the Cartesian kingdom, the true domineer:

"in the fullness of time, the madman became a menace, a terror in the town. The song he sang after every prophecy became known by almost every inhabitant of the town, and they dreaded it" (p.95).

Furthermore, the image of sparrow is enacted in *The Fishermen* to be linked to the cruel destiny Ikena is condemned to go through. The bird stands as a dysphoric icon that harbingers the properties Ikena's life has to incorporate. As a free bird, the sparrow is captured and trussed and caged into an existence of mourning and wailings. Similarly to the sparrow, Ikena is bridled and cordoned off in a mental space which is cut off any form of effulgence of geniality. His life is funnelled from joviality and his relation with his brothers and parents is turned into based-dim interactions. "I know, my spirit attest, to how much you hate me [...] you hate me; you always have" (p.124).

The litany of curses and malediction voiced by Abulu stop the young boy in a social and psychological pickle that leads Boja and his brother, Ikena to an internecine confrontation. Boja is drawn by an evil energy of his stand as an adjuvant. In spite of the love and attachment he unveils and expresses for his brother, Boja has no choice but to fulfil a destiny of sharpened desperation.

Anything equalizes in addition, madness requires an introspective operation of deconstruction to liberate oneself of one's past, one's emotion, desires and philosophy. It demands a prime emptying process that drains all prior experiences and knowledge to comply with another vision, another fascination and connection to another world of powerful spirits that can see beyond appearances of the ordinary world.

As it is presented in *The Fishermen*, madness is recorded as a negation of social norms, a refusal and denunciation of social realities through which some are privileged beyond need and other beggared below the limits of the acceptable. When emptiness and nothingness are combined to be offered as the line of horizon, a man's hopes and expectations can be disillusioned into scepticism. In *The Fishermen*, Abulu is prolonged in a mental break down that leads him into the world of diviners and spirits. His world is now that of words and his accounts are accountable to unseen forces that unveil the obscure and hazy future of Akure.

The radical loneliness that Abulu goes through prevents him from any possibility to discover and put into practices a process of alterity. His relationship with his citizen fellows is based on mutual rejection, physical and mystical challenges. The madman blames his society as a whole for the tragedy that transforms his life. Indeed, the extreme poverty that leads to his accidents is to be explained by the lack of solidarity in the community of his own. The social distancing that gives ground to his solicitude enables him, from the top of his foolishness, to look down at those he believes to be strange and bulky. His society becomes, in his eyes, a people who unthinkingly take advantage of social privileges. Thus being, he feels to have been disposed of his humanity and his opportunity to play his card right.

Being conscious of his own alienation, Abulu, willingly, decides to condemn his fellow citizens into a hectic and hustled life. Foolishness is then described as a medium, a



judge's hammer through which sound a condemnation that confines citizens of Akure into a narrow-mindedness that unfolds their hazy way of being and becoming. The madman's combat against his community highlights the form of alterity that cannot be overcome. His philosophy and his vision on life are that of a lonely man who lives in parallel of the masses' ideology. In fact, the masses in Akure lay down their ruling ways in numbers to the detriment of the force of right. *Might is right* is the bylaw that does and undoes the people's destinies in Akure.

Likewise, Abulu breaks the obstacles of the invisible knowledge to reach a *nuncaterium* power that manifests itself through prophecies utterances. He combines mystery and vagrancy to culminate his capacity to a state of *sunesis* and *polis*. The metamorphosis that his body and soul have experienced is a signal of a *meta* transformation, a symbol of renaissance that moves the begging young boy into a man who lives beyond the ordinary limits of time and space. The language he uses bears the power of a representative substance that defines a relationship between words and destiny. The *intimum* of his words reaches the apex of his fame and describes him as a man out of the man-made world.

Language is a medium of communication. It can be verbal or gestural. It engages mankind into a movement beyond his own self and establishes a line of contact between words and meanings, co-texts and contexts fusion to shape an all-meaning that informs on the vision and targets of the speaker. To speak is then an act of language that stands as an action through which the speaker can perform a good or an evil act. In *The Fishermen*, Abulu's use of language doesn't abide by traditional and ordinary forms of knowledge. It reveals itself through a process of *How to Do Things with Words* (Austin, 1975).

The prophet of Akure suffers from the way his family members are looked upon in their neighbour's eyes through which they can see their own social nakedness. As a result, they stop accepting themselves and fend for a new life, a better way of being. In this struggle against social realities, the prophet catches a glimpse of what he has become and discovers that his being is not what he has turned out to be indeed, but what appears in the eyes of his fellows. He transforms himself into a stranger for his family and walks the streets of the deviants, and that of the mad persons. This metamorphosis tears apart the harmony in his family and his society. His bodily space appears to be a crossroads of drama and cruelty. The social quandaries he goes through drift him away from his personhood to label him a good-for-nothing being whose existential presence, ironically, is so noisy and central in Akure that Abulu's reputation is stared at although feared and blamed.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Through this narrative discourse, Obioma chimes out, in a pictured and illustrative way, the different stages of the process of dispossession of Nigerians of their social decorum. Through a cruel depiction of hitches the Nigerians regularly come across, Obioma inscribes a dialectical relationship in which the action of the stronger is meant to be transformational. He spills "organizers schemas" (Fontanille, 2016: 158) of a political

and economic system whose actors connect their powers and know-how to swag the Nigerians of their wealth and prosperities. The social consequences that waft from such an addled form of management and governance is made noticeable through the degeneracy of Omi-Ala. Indeed, as a symbol of life and of revivification, Omi is de-sanctified and reduced to a place of maliciousness and fatality. Dirt and misfortune collect in and around to connect their symbols with the rancid and repellent economic and political situations in which Nigeria is penned and leashed. This *iconization* brings the author to raise the voice of the voiceless through a madman's say-so which rings wide and large to echo the agony of a majority who live and evolve at the edge of their own society. The tragic destiny that swoops down the Agwu family in addition to Abulu's doleful and distressing death, are indicative of the deep vitiations that deface the Nigerian nation. In *The Fishermen*, Obioma fishes out the archfiend that haunts the would-be heavenly lean-to of Nigerian populations who cannot but utter a blood-curdling cry in the midst of their total paucity and wretchedness.

#### REFERENCES

- [1] Austin, J.L.(1975). *How to Do Things with Words*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press.
- [2] Bruce, Berman (2003). "Ethnicity, Patronage and the African State", in *The African Affairs*.
- [3] Coomaraswamy, Ananda K.(1974)..*Buddha and the Gospel of Buddhism*, Delhi, Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers.
- [4] Duda, Gabriel (2000). *The Analysis of the Literary Text*, Bucharest, Humanitas Educational Publishing House.
- [5] Ebegbulem, Joseph (2013). "Corruption and Leadership Crisis in Africa" in *International Journal of Business and Social Sciences*.
- [6] Ebo, Socrates(2019). "Death in the Igbo African ontology" in *SKHID*, n°3.
- [7] Fontanille, Jacques (2016). *Sémiotique du discours*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de Limoges.
- [8] Foucault, Michel (1972). *Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique*, Paris, Gallimard.
- [9] Meredith, Martin (2006). "The State of Africa, a History of Fifty years of Independence" in *Jeppesstown, Jonathan Ball Publishers*.
- [10] Obioma, Chigozie (2015). *The Fishermen*, New York, Little, Brown and Company.
- [11] Washington A. J, Okumu (2002). *The African Renaissance: history, significance and strategy*, Trenton NJ and Asmara: Africa World Press.